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IDENTIFYING INSTRUCTOR EXPECTATIONS: A FOCUS GROUP EXPERIENCE

by

Kristine J. Ginley, ABD

and

Gerald Giraud, PhD

Capella University

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Address:	28 S. Wilmette Ave.
City, State, Zip:	Westmont, IL 60559
Phone:	(630) 810-1194
E-mail:	kginley@comcast.net

Abstract

A focus group was convened to discuss the behavioral, emotional, and intellectual expectations college instructors have of their students. The group was comprised of six part-time and full-time instructors from universities, private not-for-profit colleges, private for-profit colleges and community colleges. Five questions, with follow-ups, were asked. The instructors responded with behaviors and characteristics they expect their students to demonstrate. Findings indicate that college instructors have specific expectations of their students. The instructors discussed emotional characteristics, such as acceptance of responsibility for their education and seeking assistance when needed; behavioral elements, such as attending class regularly and being active listeners; and academic expectations, such as analytical reading skills and accomplished writing skills. Identifying and understanding these expectations is critical to bridging the gap between expectation and reality in today's college classrooms.

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Identifying Instructor Expectations: A Focus Group Experience

In order to discover and understand the behavioral, intellectual and emotional expectations college instructors have of their students, a representative group of college instructors was brought together in a focus group environment. Identifying the expectations of college instructors is important because there is growing evidence that many students are unprepared for the college environment (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Sanoff, 2006; Tinto, 1999). In recent years, there has been increased focus on disruptive behaviors, academic ill-preparedness and counterproductive attitudes among college students (Baldwin, 1999; Hernandez & Fister, 2001; Morrissette, 2001). By identifying and publicizing those characteristics and behaviors college instructors expect from their students, the gap between expectation and reality may eventually be lessened.

Dr. Mark Taylor (2005) wrote that there are characteristics which identify the modern college students whom he labels as “generation neXt.” Some of these characteristics include consumer and entertainment orientations, a sense of entitlement, the need for instant gratification, and tendencies toward incivility and intellectual disengagement. These characteristics form the foundation for students’ expectations of their instructors and their college experience. Generation neXt students “Expect everything, including education, to be entertaining, easy, and fun” (86). If their perception of the education they are receiving does not meet their expectations, Generation neXt students let it be known through their words and actions inside and outside of the classroom.

On the other hand, instructors are expected to learn every student’s name, make eye contact, provide progress reports, offer more collaborative learning opportunities,

make learning “fun” and participate in or plan numerous other tasks that most instructors take for granted. Central Michigan University expects its faculty to understand the goals and objectives of the program/class, construct a syllabus, design delivery to address various learning styles, assess student learning, engage in professional development, and so on (Central Michigan University's College of Extended Learning, 2001). The South Dakota Board of Regents expects, among other things, that faculty will be competent instructors and evaluators, offer challenging courses, and meet with students outside of scheduled class times. (South Dakota Board of Regents, n.d.) In the end, instructors are required to meet the sometimes conflicting expectations of the students, some of whom want their education to be fun, and the school’s administration, which is concerned about retention.

“More than ever, college instructors have reason to believe that their students are out of touch with what their grades really symbolize, why they are even in college, and what responsibilities they have as students” (Hassel & Lourey, 2005, p. 2). Their project surveyed over 1100 students to assess attitudes on learning and accountability. They found that issues such as absenteeism and grade inflation contribute to a lack of student accountability. However, Hassel and Lourey looked at the problem from the perspective of what the instructors must do help students learn to be accountable while improving the quality of education. The instruments they used to measure attitudes were given to students to complete. At no point during their project did Hassel and Lourey measure instructor expectations.

The National Institutional Priorities Study conducted by Noel-Levitz is used to “determine the perceptions of faculty, administration and staff regarding the areas of

highest importance, the areas of greatest and least agreement on meeting student expectations, and the greatest performance gaps between levels of importance and levels of agreement” (2003, p. 1). This study used the Institutional Priorities Survey™ and the Student Satisfaction Inventory™, neither of which measure instructor expectations.

In their article *Dealing with Disruptive and Emotional College Students: A Systems Model*, Hernandez and Fister (2001) wrote “Disruptive, disrespectful, and disorderly students have begun to stymie many faculty members and administrators in community colleges, colleges, and universities. It is often expected that by the time students reach college they will know how to behave in a classroom” (p. 49). There is reason to believe that instructors’ expectations of their students’ behavioral, intellectual, and emotional characteristics are taken for granted. Like the statement above that generalizes expectations of acceptable behavior, the same could be said for college students’ level of emotional maturity and intellectual achievement. However, such generalizations do not pinpoint specific characteristics that instructors expect to see in their students or gauge students’ success at meeting their instructors’ expectations. Therefore, the purpose of this focus group study was to learn from the instructors themselves what specific expectations they have of their students.

Methods and/or Techniques

College instructors from a variety of disciplines and types of colleges were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Several possible participants were identified based upon the discipline(s) and post-secondary environment(s) in which they taught, as well as their full-time or part-time teaching status. The final participants were selected

because they represented a variety of disciplines and types of colleges. Each potential participant was then personally invited to attend the focus group interview..

The six final participants represented part-time or full-time faculty at universities, private not-for-profit colleges, private for-profit colleges and community colleges. One instructor taught part-time in criminal justice. Another was a full-time game software design instructor. The third instructor taught part-time in liberal arts. A fourth instructor taught part-time in interior design, computer aided design and architecture. The fifth individual was a part-time business instructor, and the final instructor taught part time in math and accounting. All of these instructors taught at colleges in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs.

A script was used to ensure that each participant was presented with the same question phrased in the same way. The script included the following description of the project:

Within the topic of instructor expectations, we will be concentrating on three specific areas: behavioral, emotional and intellectual. This will not be an open-ended discussion. Instead, it will be a process through which data can be collected to identify and understand instructor expectations. I will be asking no more than five questions that are related to these areas. The questions will move from general to specific and address each area separately. Please keep your answers focused on the topic. The discussion will last no more than two hours. At the conclusion of the discussion, I will summarize your comments and ask for any additional information.

The participants were asked five questions, each with follow-up opportunities:

1. What specific skills do you expect college students to have?
Study skills? Math skills? Language skills? Reading skills? Time management skills?
2. What general knowledge do you expect college students to have?
History? Geography? Science? Current events? Literature?
3. What classroom behaviors do you expect college students to demonstrate?
Academic? Interpersonal?
4. How do you expect college students to deal with frustration?
Failure? Success? Life crises as they impact school?
5. How much responsibility do you expect students to take for their learning?
Adaptability to instructor teaching style? Following instructions?
Developing/maintaining intellectual curiosity? Critical thinking? Establishing learning patterns?

The participants' answers were written on a white board by a non-participant so that the moderator could concentrate on the discussion. At the end of the discussion, the participants were thanked and given the following information:

The analysis will begin within the next 24-48 hours. Once the analysis is complete, an online survey will be created that incorporates the results of this focus group discussion. I will send the link to each of you so that you can complete the survey and provide feedback for improvement.

After the participants left the room, the notes from the white board were copied. They were organized by type of expectation. Using the responses from the focus group, the initial draft of the survey was created.

Description of responses

The first question about specific skills was asked to provide a foundation for the intellectual expectations portion of the survey. The participants agreed that there are a number of skills they expect from their college students. They began by talking about basic academic skills, such as reading, writing and mathematics. Even though only one instructor taught math, all agreed that students should be able to perform basic math functions through high school algebra. They reasoned that the skills taught in math – the ability to think logically and critically, utilize problem-solving techniques and describe the steps necessary to reach a solution – are skills that should be utilized in every class. The instructors next discussed reading as an academic skill. All of the instructors expect their students to be able to comprehend and analyze what they are reading. One instructor suggested that students need to be able to read, comprehend and analyze at least 100 pages per week per class.

The focus group participants then proceeded to discuss communication skills. First, the participants agreed that students need to be able to follow directions, whether they are given verbally or in writing. Next, all agreed that college students need to have accomplished writing skills. One instructor suggested that college students should be able to write a meaningful story and generally have above average composition skills. When asked to define composition skills, the instructor responded that students should be able to correctly use the rules of grammar and mechanics to produce written communications that are technically correct and interesting and engaging to read. Another instructor mentioned the need to include a working knowledge of APA or MLA style for citations and references, which all of the college instructors assumed is taught during high school.

Two other communication elements that the focus group participants discussed were interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. All of the instructors expected their students to verbalize their perceptions in ways that are appropriate to a classroom environment, meaning that they expect their students to use more formal language in the classroom. Part of this expectation included knowing when to ask questions and how to express themselves non-judgmentally in response to others, while on the intrapersonal communication side being open to questioning their own positions.

The focus group participants also mentioned the connection between communication and technology while discussing interpersonal communication. They expected their students to have email addresses and know how to use email so that students can contact them when they will be late or absent, which the instructors considered to be a common courtesy. In addition to knowing how to use email, the instructors expected their students to possess sufficient technical skills to produce properly typed and formatted written work. They also assumed that students know how to utilize the resources around them, both technical and personal.

The second question in the script addressed the types of general knowledge college instructors expect of their students. This question sparked lively discussion. One of the first comments from an instructor was that he felt his students 1) think and act as though life has always been the way it is now, and 2) are blissfully unaware of the progress that has been made throughout world and American history. The other instructors agreed and added that they need their students to be aware of the connection between social events and their course of study. This included current events, other cultures both inside of and outside of the United States, and pop culture in the United

States. Additionally, the participants agreed that students should know how the political process in this country can impact social events and, therefore, their courses of study. In general, these are all elements that the focus group participants considered to be common knowledge that well-rounded individuals would have at their fingertips.

The instructors also mentioned some items of general knowledge that could be added to their responses to the first question on academic preparation. For example, there was an expectation that college students would know weights, measures, and map reading. A few of the instructors assumed that students are able to use calculators. All of the participants agreed that their students should have read some of the classic works of literature, such as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Salinger, and have both knowledge of and experience in public speaking. It was clear from the discussion that the instructors considered all of this knowledge and these skills necessary for students to be successful in college.

The next question during the focus group interview asked the instructors to describe the types of classroom behaviors they expected their students to demonstrate. This portion of the interview produced the greatest number of items for discussion in the shortest amount of time. The instructors were very attuned to the types of academic and personal behaviors students should demonstrate at the college level. On the academic side, the first expectation is that students will be academically honest. The participants defined this as students being expected to do their own work and give credit to others for any work that is borrowed. Next, the instructors expected their students to be prepared for class by having done reading, writing, and research outside of class through the use of the library and online resources. Every instructor cited the difficulties of conducting effective

discussions in class when the students are unprepared to participate. In addition to this, and taking the idea of outside preparation one step farther, the focus group participants expected learning to take place outside of the classroom. This coincides with the responses to the previous question related to knowledge of current events, and so on. Finally, every instructor agreed that they expect their students to take notes in class. This is seen as a significant step students can take to improve their chances for success in any class.

The majority of responses to the classroom behaviors question related to personal behaviors that students demonstrate inside the classroom. Virtually all of the behaviors the instructors cited could be termed common courtesies. For example, each of the instructors expected their students to be punctual. This was seen as a sign of respect for the instructor and the other students in the class. Some of the behaviors were seen as elements of good academic debate, such as active participation and sharing of ideas, showing interest in the opinions of others, talking civilly and in turn, actively listening and engaging, and using what the instructors termed ‘classroom-appropriate language.’ Still other behaviors were related to the use of technology. The focus group instructors expected their students to turn off their cell phones and put them away. Some of the participants perceived laptop computers to be a distraction in a classroom and, therefore, expected their students to turn off their laptops or leave them at home, even when they were being used to take notes. When asked for an explanation, the instructors noted that laptops with wireless capability can be used to surf the Internet from any location where a wireless access point can be found. Furthermore, the clicking of the keyboard, mouse and/or touchpad was cited as distracting to the instructor and to the students in the

vicinity of the laptop. Finally, with the identification of each individual behavior, the participants added that they expected their students to understand that there are consequences when they do not demonstrate the expected behaviors – an expectation within an expectation.

The fourth question addressed the emotional characteristics instructors expect their students to demonstrate. The precise wording of the question was: How do you expect college students to deal with frustration? Failure, Success? Life crises as they impact school? The instructors indicated that they expected their students to take directed action in dealing with their frustrations but that students need to keep those frustrations out of the classroom. However, when students' frustrations threaten their academic success, instructors expected their students to verbalize their frustrations, discuss them for better understanding and to learn where their frustrations originate, and go to the source of the frustrations to begin taking responsibility for making things better. Each of the participants wanted students to come to them when they have issues that could impact their success in the class. The focus group instructors saw this as part of establishing their broader expectation that students will follow the chain of command to address class-related issues.

Related to these topics were the instructors' expectations that college students should be able to anticipate problems and keep the spotlight on their education. The instructors in the focus group indicated that they expected their students to understand that the world does not revolve around them. Sometimes, the instructors said, students have to say 'I don't know.' Even so, the focus group instructors recognized that it is hard

to have a large number of expectations related to this question because college is where students learn the skills necessary to handle their problems and express their frustrations.

The final focus group question dealt with behavioral, emotional and intellectual expectations by asking the instructors to indicate how much responsibility they expected their students to take for their education. Follow up questions included responsibility for adapting to an instructor's teaching style, following instructions, developing/maintaining intellectual curiosity, critical thinking and learning patterns. Immediately, the participants responded by saying that they expected their students to take full responsibility for their learning until the students start asking questions. The instructors anticipated that students would use them as facilitators and resources, particularly when the students were having difficulty adapting to the college setting; however, students were expected to invest considerable personal effort in their learning. As one instructor put it, it is the instructor's responsibility to plant the seed but the students have to help it grow.

Other expectations identified through the focus group interview were related to learning styles. All of the participants agreed that students must understand that learning is an active process. Furthermore, the instructors felt that their students should be expected to know how they learn best and adjust to that rather than to an instructor's teaching style because the students' learning patterns and knowledge gained from previous classes have already been established.

Initial Survey Results

After the focus group interviews were completed, the notes were gathered and a preliminary survey instrument was created. The focus group participants were invited to take the survey online and provide feedback about its effectiveness in articulating the

expectations they discussed (Dillman, 2000; Krueger, 1998). This initial feedback was gathered through the written comments the focus group participants submitted at the end of each section of the survey. After the behavioral sections, the focus group participants wrote the following:

- Respect for Professor and other students is very high on my list. Much lower on my list is their preparation; as long as they do not distract from other students' learning environment, it does not bother me if they fail to engage. They must learn to engage if they wish to learn/pass the class, but it is their money. My class exhibits polar opposites on many of these questions with entry level classes performing much much worse than those at the 300 level.
- Most students don't take notes, so that makes completing the assignments, turning them in, asking the right questions, etc. difficult - because they didn't pay enough attention to get it right the first time (and don't have the notes to remind them).
- Too many students expect all the learning to be done in class, and only through the instructor's effort.

After the emotional characteristics sections, the focus group participants provided the following feedback:

- I notice a huge difference between the 18-22 crowd at this school as compared to the 28+ crowd at my other school. It seems the younger crowd has not yet experience the impact of performing poorly in these areas.
- Too many student view education in general and learning commitment in particular as an inconvenience.

Finally, after the intellectual characteristics sections, the written feedback was as follows:

- Again, there's a big difference between the entry level and 300 level students. Maturity play a big role here.
- According to too many students' beliefs, the world began in 2000 and nothing before last year is of any relevance.

In addition to the written feedback from the initial survey, informal conversations provided positive suggestions for improvement to the survey prior to the pilot study. For example, all of the focus group participants urged a rewording of the survey's introduction so that it would be more descriptive. Three members of the group suggested that the collection of demographic information be moved to the end of the survey and expanded in order to include years of experience and subject(s) taught. Most of the focus group participants felt that the 1-5 scale forced responses for items they may not have observed. Therefore, a 4-point scale with an option for N/A was suggested for the pilot. Finally, some of the group members noted the similarities between a few items and the possible overlap of other items between sections. For example, practicing academic honesty is an expectation that could fall in any of the three sections.

As a result of the focus group experience, changes were made to the survey, and the pilot study was conducted in August 2006. At the time of this writing, the data are being analyzed with the hope of producing a final version of the survey before October 2006.

Conclusions

A considerable amount of information about instructor expectations was gathered during the focus group process. Based upon the feedback from the participants, it can be concluded that college instructors from various disciplines who teach in all types of

schools agree that they do have expectations of their students in the areas of behavior, emotional maturity and academic preparedness. The instructors who were interviewed also agreed that the knowledge, skills and attitudes they identified in each of these areas can be grouped together to form measurable scales in in-class behaviors, study skills, personal behaviors, adult learning characteristics, interpersonal characteristics, basic academic skills, thinking skills, and skills in social sciences/humanities/sciences. Finally, this focus group experience allowed a rather diverse group of individuals to identify common expectations that were held by all participants regardless of their discipline or teaching situation. These conclusions point to the need to pursue further research into the topic of instructor expectations.

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